

Recent brain research shows that we learn in a weblike fashion—the web of context. The brain searches for patterns and simultaneously goes down many paths. I cannot teach in isolation and expect kids to apply it. I have to guide students by building an environment that supports writers in becoming their own critics, kids who look to punctuation and grammar to make their messages clear and interesting.

Begin



A New Paradigm: Grammar and Mechanics Through Writer's Craft

Instead of “drill and kill,” instead of the mindless workbook pages, instead of the vapid test preparation materials, I use powerful literature and student writing to teach the rules of language.

One principle that undergirds my thinking about grammar and mechanics is that they are inherently linked to craft, and by making this link, we alter students' perceptions of what mechanics and grammar do. Instead of separating these into different craft and mechanics lessons, they should be merged whenever possible. It is this very idea of focusing on craft instead of correctness that so revolutionized my teaching of grammar and mechanics. In this way, we have kids crafting their writing with correct mechanics and grammar without even realizing they are learning them.

The ten minutes or so of writer's workshop I reserve for grammar and mechanics instruction needs to be filtered through these questions: How is this grammar and mechanics issue also a craft issue, and how can I use it to generate some authentic text? How can I look at it in the context of literature? And finally, how can I quickly turn kids back to their writing, so they can be on their way to becoming independent revisers, crafters, and editors?

I know from reading research that students can only attend to a certain number of things at one time. The more I make editing, correcting, and revising activities as regular as breathing in my workshop, the more independent my writers will become. The more I allow my students to be active problem solvers in these processes, the more they will be able to decide what, in fact, they should do.

What's my goal? Do we want students to identify and correct errors, or do we want them to know how to use the power of punctuation to create a message that is clear and beautiful? I want both, of course.

When teachers lament that their kids can't edit, revise, or correct their own work, I wonder whether there may be a missing piece to the puzzle. Do we ask students to edit before they have seen the patterns or know the concepts we ask them to edit for? We all want our students to have sovereignty over sentences, to self-govern their grammar, to have a license to edit, but what kind of training are they getting?

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Excerpt Ch. 1

First and foremost, I teach the mechanics students need to know. Teach, not mention. Teach, not correct errors. Whenever my students aren't successful, I ask myself these questions:

- What have I done to teach this grammar or mechanics pattern?
- Have I immersed students in correct models? Visually and orally?
- Did I post an example (through a wall chart or insert pasted in their writer's notebooks)?
- Have I demonstrated how to use the mechanics pattern in a piece of my own writing?
- Have I modeled correcting this type of error in focused edits?
- Have I given students ample practice in editing this particular type of error?
- Is the item on the class's editor's checklist?
- Have I directed the students to edit their own writing for this type of error on multiple occasions?
- Is this mechanical error important enough to warrant doing all of the aforementioned work to teach it?

Once I give students a few processes, instead of loading them with a ton of strategies, they will be independent when they need to be. Without marinating in models from literature, without using mechanics to cook up their own messages, students will never be the editors or writers they could be.

What Is Context Anyway?

Teachers fear that if they have students look at one sentence as a whole class, they are breaking some writer's workshop law, that the craft cops are going to come beat them to the ground with a whole text. To put *context* in context, let's turn to *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition's* definition:

Context n. 1. *The parts of a sentence, paragraph or discourse, etc., immediately surrounding a specified word or passage that determines its exact meaning.*

Other definitions say similar things about the surrounding words "throwing light on its meaning" or "helping explain its meaning." Context is about meaning. Any chunk of meaning is a context. The key is meaning, not length. We can zoom into the sentence level, or the paragraph level, and zoom back out to the essay level or beyond.

Instructionally, we make decisions about zooming in and out as needed. This view of context allows us to cut away the noise and focus on a concept, then quickly zoom out into a larger context once the pattern is seen.

All the workshop experts tell us to teach grammar and mechanics in context. Some teachers have become paranoid about teaching grammar in context—they believe that “context” means using whole texts only. They never cut away all the noise of an entire essay to focus in on one high-payoff grammar and mechanics concept or common error, never use the shortest possible text.

Our hearts are in the right place. In workshop we teach one thing a time, one thing kids can easily hold in their heads and apply. One thing we can scaffold. One shared experience. Here’s where our heads come in. Use an essay to exemplify one grammatical concept? I don’t think so. Truth is, there will be so many great grammar and mechanics things going on that it will be hard to focus, especially at first. So, workshop hearts and minds must meet in the context of a sentence. Taking the time to notice what effect the author’s use of craft has on the reader, playing around with what-ifs, imitation, and permutation—you can do these things most effectively with a sentence or two.

Pulling It All Together Workshop-Style

To incorporate this focused approach to teaching grammar and mechanics into my writer’s workshop, I didn’t have to throw out what I was already doing. I just tweaked the processes of my successful workshop. I began doing the following:

- Using the shortest mentor text possible so that kids could cling to the craft and meaning without being overwhelmed by words and punctuation.
- Teaching one thing at a time and applying it to our daily writing encourages students to keep inventing and generating text while cueing them into specific concepts and strategies.
- Adding quick daily doses of grammar and mechanics experiences with short mentor texts and editing so that my students would have ongoing, shared experience with playing with and understanding grammar and mechanics.
- Providing rich experiences in the writer’s notebook to apply and play with mentor sentences as new concepts were introduced.
- Giving students scaffolds in the forms of examples and visual inserts for their writer’s notebooks to help them start and continue collecting, categorizing, and imitating mentor texts.
- Saturating my walls with visuals that provide reinforcement of the concepts introduced and used by writers. The placement and color of

these visuals reinforce key concepts that students need to know, helping them make connections and distinctions of meaning.

Why I Had to Write This Book

Over the last four years, I have been sharing my grammar and mechanics strategies and theories with other teachers. I've worked with teachers who only use grammar workbooks or test prep materials. I've worked with teachers who don't understand the underlying patterns and rules of more sophisticated prose. I've even worked with teachers who say in a slow Southern drawl, "I'm not mechanically inclined." I hope this book will help teachers who are unsure about grammar, as well as those teachers who are walking style guides.

It's no wonder we have a generation of teachers who don't feel confident about teaching grammar and mechanics. Maybe they were workbooked or diagrammed to death. Maybe their teachers avoided grammar and mechanics instruction altogether. Maybe they were led to believe that best practice in literacy instruction couldn't include explicit instruction in grammar and mechanics. Now, with standardized grammar tests from the fourth grade all the way to the new SAT, the bottom line has become clear: We have to find ways to teach students about grammar and mechanics at a time when they have less and less experience with the printed word.

The purpose of this book is to give teachers concrete ways to merge grammar and mechanics with craft in the context of meaningful writing. Kids can use these quick strategies in their own writing without ever cracking open a grammar book. However, students will still receive scaffolding on deciphering the code of our language.

Studying brain research, the learning theories of Lev Vygotsky, Harry Noden, Constance Weaver, William Strong, and all the writing teachers who fill my reference list, I searched to find what works in the teaching of grammar and mechanics. I taught and tweaked, tried and revised, until I had the base for lessons included in this book. Over the years, I have experimented in my inner-city classroom and discovered strategies for teaching grammar and mechanics in quick, well-selected doses.

I knew there had to be some research-based way to teach grammar and mechanics that would stick with my students and transfer into their writing—without resorting to what I had learned from experience wouldn't work.

Changing the prevailing negative attitude toward the teaching of grammar and mechanics is my mission. Grammar and mechanics no longer have to be the castor oil of writing workshop—something yucky you have to swallow before you can get to the business of writing. Grammar and

mechanics are the business of shaping our writing, shaping our meaning, and creating effects that dazzle.

Sixteen years of study and experimentation in my inner-city classroom have led me to share my experiences as I continue to learn more about students and writing instruction. I hope what I offer can become a part of living and growing classrooms where options for writing (grammatical or mechanical) are shared, explored, crafted, questioned, revised, and enjoyed.

I intend for students and teachers to view grammar and mechanics as a creational facility rather than a correctional one. The teaching of conventions is about what punctuation can do to enhance the writer's message. Wouldn't it be cool if students thought of grammar and mechanics as play? If they had a "let's see what this does" attitude? This is the attitude I hope to cultivate with this book.